

STATE OF THE SCHOOLS ADDRESS

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First, thank you for coming today for my first State of the Schools address. I would like to thank the Akron Press Club for hosting this event and would like to acknowledge our school board members (identify members); Mayor Don Plusquellic, who is in Washington trying to secure our share of the federal economic stimulus package; Summit County Executive Russ Pry; and other distinguished guests.

I am the product of urban public education. I graduated from John Adams High School in Cleveland. I have degrees in economics and public administration, both from Cleveland State University – an urban university. I live and work in Akron.

My journey in the school district began nearly 17 years ago when I was hired to work in the office of environmental management. Within a short period of time, I learned my way around Akron and visited nearly every school. Along the way, I met many fine people who are concerned about children and dedicated to their profession.

By nature, I would say I am one of those people who try to figure out how things fit together. When I moved into the business office, I worked closely with Dr. Sylvester Small. Working with Dr. Small, I learned more about the curricular side of the district. And that's when I began to connect the dots. Teaching and learning is not just the teacher's job. It is the responsibility of the entire organization and beyond. Everyone must support high quality teaching and learning in the classroom.

While working in the business office, I also had the opportunity to work on the Ohio School Facilities project. As you all know, this is an \$800 million project with our partner, the City of Akron, to turn our schools into community learning centers — schools by day and opened to the community in the evenings and weekends. Working in partnership with the Mayor and others on this project, I gained valuable insight on how Akron Public Schools fits into the larger community and why good schools are so critical to our local economy and neighborhoods.

So, when Dr. Small announced his retirement in early 2008, I could not pass up the chance to continue this important work. In our 162-year history, I am only the 22nd superintendent of Akron Public Schools.

I believe that in the past 162 years, our public school system has done an excellent job of educating generations of children and providing them with skills for jobs in the 19th and 20th centuries. But that is no longer good enough.

The academic skills demanded by many entry-level jobs are now at a higher level than the academic skills required for post-secondary education. The skills for 21st-century jobs are now driven by technology and global competition. Schools have to keep pace and re-conceive education to connect with current reality.

First, let me give you a brief overview of our schools. Then, I want to talk about my vision, our challenges and exciting possibilities on the horizon.

Akron Public Schools is the fifth largest district in Ohio. We operate 53 schools and three administration facilities and employ about 3,100 full-time employees.

Our current student enrollment is 23,850. The district works with SIX independent bargaining units. About 39% of our funding comes from local sources, and 61% is from state and federal.

Our schools operate within a dynamic community. Schools are tied to our local and regional economy and, borrowing a phrase from The University of Akron President Dr. Proenza, “we are in an intellectual supply chain.” This supply chain spans from pre-kindergarten to high school to college and on to local industry.

Akron Public Schools mission statement acknowledges this vital connection to the greater community. It was written collaboratively with community representatives — people who understood that the entire community is responsible for educating our children.

Our Mission is:

“to ensure that each student in our diverse population achieves his or her fullest potential in a safe and affirming learning center characterized by an extensive, student-focused collaboration of all segments of the community, with an emphasis on preparing students to live and excel in a global environment.”

Our mission points to the importance of preparing children to live in a world where children learn the right skills for the right job at the right time. And this is a time with exceptional challenges. In fact, our local community faces the same challenges that President Barack Obama spoke of in his inaugural address — issues like the economy, health care, jobs, the environment and education, to name just a few. This is a time when innovation and change are imperative.

Our schools must be at the forefront of fostering that change. The educational options for future generations must provide skills for problem solving,

opportunities to work with others, respect for diverse people and cultures, and superior communications skills.

Our schools, in partnership with this community, must feed the intellectual supply chain. You and I must support teaching and learning through a child's entire educational journey — starting in the home and continuing through post-secondary education. We need to turn out the best teachers, scientists, tradesmen, engineers, artists, medical professionals, mathematicians, leaders and more, to make our community and our world a better place.

My vision for Akron Public Schools is one of collaboration — working together, focusing resources and transforming education to prepare the next generation for the opportunities ahead.

OUR CHALLENGES

I sincerely believe that we can improve and expand educational opportunities for children. However, it is true that we face some daunting challenges.

The Funding Challenge:

Our local community, state and nation are facing difficult economic challenges. Schools are no different. We can all agree that the public we serve has grown tired of tax levy after tax levy. Pitting retired property owners against those who still have children in school is a losing battle when less than 25% of our households have children in school.

Governor Strickland's state-of-the-state address last week was very upbeat and positive about the future of public education. And he proposed some changes in state funding. While we are eager to work with the Governor, we are currently evaluating whether or not his proposal for eliminating phantom revenue in the funding formula or seeking a conversion levy will work for Akron in the long run.

Daily, we read articles about businesses and organizations facing significant deficits. And Akron Public Schools is no different.

At this point, we project a \$37 million deficit as early as 2011, which will rise to \$90 million in 2012 and \$153 million in 2013. This projection is based on state funding remaining stable with no changes in salaries and employee staffing levels.

Obviously, we cannot sit idly by, wait for a federal bailout or wait for the details of the Governor's education budget to be worked out. While we applaud and look forward to working with Governor Strickland and his staff on his education plan, we cannot wait. We must act now to solve our own financial problems. This will mean significant budget cuts.

The Challenge of Right-Sizing the District:

When I first started working for the Akron Public Schools in 1992, our enrollment stood at nearly 34,000 students compared to our current enrollment of 23,800 students. For the most part, our organizational structure and the number of school buildings have not changed significantly.

Yes, we closed five buildings and made nearly \$40 million in budget cuts earlier this decade. We must continue to right-size the district in proportion to our enrollment and reorganize the district to be better able to meet the challenges ahead.

The Student Achievement Challenge:

Akron Public Schools rose from Academic Emergency to Continuous Improvement and remains in Continuous Improvement today. Moving into the Effective category will be no easy feat. The rules for ranking schools and the types of tests our children take each year continually change. However, with focused district support, our staff and students are committed to reaching that goal.

Although we've seen significant gains in student achievement over the past six years and are recognized as one of the top performing large urban districts in the state, we met only 5 of 30 indicators on the state report card last year. This is unacceptable.

We still see significant achievement gaps, particularly with African-American male students. And it is critical that we move more students on to post secondary education.

A survey of last year's 1,368-student graduating class showed that about 840, or about 60%, planned to pursue some type of post-secondary studies. Another 300 students indicated that they wanted to pursue post-secondary studies but

did not have the financial ability to pay for it. Sixty percent is not enough for us to serve a prominent role in the intellectual supply chain.

The Safety/Discipline Challenge:

One of our highest priorities, and an ongoing challenge, is keeping our schools safe and affirming. We have zero tolerance for any behavior that threatens the safety of students and staff. Sometimes, that means our students, who may think they are just playing a prank, will be suspended, expelled or even arrested.

Discipline problems are also a challenge. If your child's classroom is disrupted by a student who cannot behave properly, your child loses time on task as the teacher addresses that problem. We recognize that there are students who are continually disruptive in the classroom. These children need intensive supports and specialized environments where they can get the attention they need. We also know that we have to do a better job giving positive recognition to students who are doing the right thing. We can no longer let them go unnoticed and spend a disproportionate amount of our time dealing with students exhibiting inappropriate behaviors.

OUR GOALS

Striking the balance between our vision and our challenges is no easy task. But we do have a comprehensive and focused plan.

Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, once said, "If the rate of change **inside** an institution is less than the rate of change **outside**, the end is in sight." How true this is for schools.

If schools don't keep pace, public education will become irrelevant to the lives of students and the larger community. And public education will disappear.

From pre-school through high school, into college and the workplace, we must reshape education to meet our changing society. It will be my goal to transform the traditional institution of learning into one that can meet the demands of the 21st century. Moving forward, every employee is going to focus his or her work on these five strategic goals:

1. Ensuring high quality teaching and learning
2. Recruiting, developing and retaining high performing staff

3. Building relationships with students, staff, family and community
4. Seeking adequate resources while maintaining fiscal responsibility
5. Providing safe, orderly and affirming community learning centers

Let me explain how we will achieve these goals.

1. Ensuring high quality teaching and learning

Our primary mission is teaching and learning; and at the heart of it all is the relationship among skilled teachers, engaged students and a high quality, rigorous and relevant curriculum. We call this the instructional core.

Every employee, from the teacher to the bus driver, is engaged in the educational process. We recognize that what we teach, and what children learn, must be relevant to the workplace. Today, learning is far more than memorizing historical events and regurgitating it on a test.

Some of our students attend our career technical programs, like dental assisting or masonry, and immediately enter the workplace. Our Early College and Seniors to Sophomores students attend The University of Akron and earn a high school diploma and college credits at the same time. Other APS students graduate and attend colleges or trade schools or serve our country in the military.

No matter what academic route they take, students must be prepared to be creative, solve problems and work with others. Our teachers will be trained on how to embed 21st-century skills into all aspects of our curriculum.

One major step toward meeting this goal is the creation of our operation of our science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, middle school which will serve as a model professional development school for teachers in Akron, this region and future educators through The University of Akron.

Next fall, I look forward to opening the doors of our new science, technology, engineering and mathematics school. With our partners — the City of Akron, The University of Akron, National Inventors Hall of Fame Foundation, the Greater Akron Chamber and Akron Tomorrow — the STEM school will be a prototype of future community collaborations.

This program will be an exciting step forward in transforming education as we know it. The program will be collaborative and technology-based and break all the rules of traditional education.

By appealing to a student's interests, learning style and aptitudes, the goal of the STEM school will be to teach students how to apply their knowledge to solve real-world problems. When we teach students how to apply knowledge, they retain it better, they perform better on tests and they are more productive employees.

In this age of collaboration and community partnerships, I want to say thank you to the following organizations for their support in donating funds to make this exciting new learning opportunity a reality: Federal Earmark, GAR Foundation, OMNOVA Foundation, ExxonMobil, Ohio STEM Schools Grant and the Ohio STEM Learning Network. To date, we have raised more than \$3 million to support teaching and learning at our STEM middle school.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 12 fastest growing occupations in the country are technology based and/or tied to the health care industry. So, as our middle school STEM students move into high school, I envision a high school that offers a science, technology, engineering, mathematics AND medical program.

In addition, this school should be one that combines academics with actual immersion into these career fields through internships, job shadowing and mentoring. It would give our young people the chance to gain valuable experience working in local companies. Also, imagine students being able to earn college credit, building upon our experience with the Akron Early College Program. I would like to see an early college component to our STEMM high school.

With solid partnerships and funding in place, this STEMM center of excellence could be open, not only to students within our own district but to students from the surrounding districts through open enrollment, similar to our very successful Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts.

Stan Hywet: We continue to be open to innovative and creative educational partnerships that will benefit our children. Today, I am happy to confirm that we are entering an exploratory phase with the board of Stan Hywet Hall to look at the feasibility of building a unique community learning center on their property which will be tied to their educational program for grades K through 5. APS, the City of Akron and Stan Hywet Hall will form a committee to outline options for each of our respective organizations to consider. I am very excited by the prospect of working on this unique collaboration.

Looking to the 21st Century: I agree with Governor Strickland on taking a forward vision of preparing students for the 21st century. Another major strategy toward transforming our instruction to meet the 21st-century needs of our workforce is to create a culture where we consistently examine our teaching practice. Currently, APS is participating in several innovative partnerships with the Ohio Department of Education to transform our work as educators. The Ohio Leadership Collaborative is a project through which we, along with several other Ohio school districts, are working with ODE and researchers from Harvard University to use research-based practices to understand 21st-century skills and how to implement them across our respective districts.

One key component of this work is using an instructional-rounds model to help teachers improve their teaching practices. By adopting a medical rounds approach, teachers observe each others' teaching methods, provide feedback to each other and collaborate on what best practices should be implemented.

Over the last year, we also participated in a project with the Ohio 8 Coalition and McREL, sponsored by KnowledgeWorks, where we undertook a comprehensive scenario-planning process based on future trends outlined in *KnowledgeWorks' Map of the Future Forces Affecting Education*.

Looking forward to the year 2020, the group of Ohio 8 urban districts developed four scenarios to answer the question: How can urban public education in Ohio transform to become a high-demand, high-performing system in 2020? Our report, *Leading the Parade*, is already serving to jumpstart our improvement efforts by making us aware of some possible futures for urban education.

We will continue our partnership with the Governor's initiative for *Closing the Achievement Gap* which focuses on ninth-grade males. Additionally, our district-sponsored charter school, the Akron Digital Academy, is undergoing a transformation under new leadership. By operating without the heavy burden of state regulations, we are looking to improve the opportunities for children whose parents want options to the traditional public school. I am proud to say our digital academy utilizes Akron Public Schools teachers, delivers strong instructional services and customer service, and has achieved a ranking of Continuous Improvement unlike many of its struggling competitors.

We will align our instruction and provide services and support to ensure all students have the opportunity to attend college. We will continue to support and work toward expanding our strong College Access programs with The University of Akron, such as Early College, Career Tech Prep and Seniors to

Sophomores. It would be a shame to focus on getting more students ready for college and failing to help them, as a community, to pay for it.

That is why we support the Summit Education Initiative's Destination College Program. We are helping high school students at Garfield and East make the transition to college through mentoring, academic support, ACT test preparation and financial assistance. This program serves as a model that should be expanded to more of our schools.

I also want to highlight a model school/business partnership that supports college readiness. **JP Morgan Chase Foundation** is sponsoring the LEAP UP in Reading program, including a \$20,000 grant which supports University of Akron education majors to work as tutors as part of their service learning. This is the second year for this program and this year was expanded to include a second school. The program also provides field trips to The University of Akron to motivate and expose young children, sometimes for the first time, to the college environment. Chase also provided a \$12,000 grant to pay for all juniors and seniors at East High School to take the ACT. We support the Governor's desire to replace the Ohio Graduation Test with the ACT test.

2. Recruiting, developing and retaining high performing staff

It is my firm belief that it is a privilege to work for Akron Public Schools. We must actively manage our human capital by recruiting the best; being more deliberate in our hiring process; and providing ongoing, relevant training and striving to retain those who are successfully achieving our goals.

We are partnering with the Ohio Department of Education to implement significant reforms in our recruitment, hiring, retention and evaluation practices with the goal of employing the highest performing teachers in this region. As a parent of two APS students myself, I expect this type of rigorous and efficient hiring process.

3. Building relationships with students, staff, family and community

Not only am I privileged to serve as the superintendent, I am a customer of Akron Public Schools. As a customer, I expect that my children's school will communicate with me as well as listen and act on my concerns.

Customer service is a critical element in choice. Today's parents have many options for educating their children, including community/charter schools as

well as parochial and private. Parents choose the schools that provide the best service to meet their child's needs. Therefore, we will establish clear expectations for customer service; and we will institute on-going training and monitoring of our service.

Actively building relationships with the community is also extremely critical to urban education. We have all heard the arguments on why urban schools fail.

Yes, poverty is an issue — in fact the poverty rate in our schools is nearly 80%. And, yes, I know that lack of early learning opportunities that prepare students for kindergarten is an issue; and discipline can be an issue. However, these issues are not an excuse to fail our students.

This is a community rich with volunteers and social organizations specializing in child and family support. Akron Public Schools must foster partnerships with these organizations. We must take our children from wherever they are, give them a support system and take them to a successful future.

We already have many partnerships in place, and we pledge to build on this strong foundation to truly create community learning centers. Here are just a few programs that showcase the important relationship between schools and community:

Akron After School is an award-winning program. The Mayor's Office was intimately involved in the development of this program; and it is funded by the City of Akron, Federal 21st CLC grant, Summit County Job & Family Services and our federal Title I program. Akron After School expands learning opportunities for nearly 2,000 youngsters in 11 of the district's highest poverty, lowest performing elementary schools. Students who attend regularly had higher scores and showed greater improvement in reading and math on state and district tests.

Perkins Activity Central Program is an after-school program at Perkins Middle School designed to provide enrichment activities to students in grades 6-8. PAC began in 2004 with a grant from The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. This is a successful partnership where local groups hold after-school activities to help students achieve and stay in school. A recent student showed that students who attend PAC frequently have the fewest days of tardiness and absences at nearly every grade level. These same students had the least number of suspensions and the highest math and reading scores.

AkronReads is celebrating its 10th-anniversary this year. AkronReads is an outstanding and successful community partnership. More than 550 tutors — 363 tutors from 24 companies and 193 more tutors from across the community — volunteer for this program. CEOs, community leaders and employees at all levels spend one hour each week reading to nearly 1,400 Akron students. AkronReads plays an important role in our district’s focused efforts to help children achieve in reading.

Pastoral Counseling provides school-based mental health services in nearly every one of our schools. Their therapists and case managers provide support for children struggling with significant behavioral or emotional issues. This is a model example of how community organizations can wrap services around children to break down the barriers that prevent them from accessing their education.

In addition, we are currently working with Judge Linda Teodosio of Summit County Juvenile Court and Child Guidance and Family Solutions on another pilot program which seeks to reduce the number of referrals to juvenile court for issues related to disruptive school behavior or truancy. The goal of this pilot program is to link children and families to services offered in the community and thereby avoid a referral to the court.

Business Advisory Council: The Business Advisory Council includes representatives from most of the major businesses and organizations in Akron. The BAC has helped the district evaluate its business, human resources and information management operation. It has also offered useful recommendations and saved the district thousands of dollars.

Superintendent’s Advisory Committee: I am extremely interested in the ideas, hopes and dreams of our community. In the next few months, I plan to establish a Superintendent’s Advisory Committee. By appointing a select group of community leaders in neighborhoods all over Akron, this group will serve as my eyes and ears, and provide feedback to me and the school board.

4. Seeking adequate funding while maintaining fiscal responsibility

First, CLC Project: We will continue to aggressively rebuild our schools along with our partners, the City of Akron and Ohio School Facilities Commission. To date, we have completed 11 Community Learning Centers — which represents a little more than 20% of the total project. We currently have 10 more CLCs under construction. I am happy to report that we are seeking LEED Silver

certification for these new buildings by making them more energy efficient. This will save us precious operating dollars in the long run.

Second, as I mentioned earlier, we will soon face significant deficits. It is important to note that these deficits have never been of our making. We have been extremely responsible with our funds and transparent about every dollar we spend. There is no doubt that we have been good financial stewards. I believe we have been as successful at maintaining our fiscal stability as any district in the state.

Simply put, our deficit situation stems from funding that does not keep pace with escalating costs and unfunded mandates — from declining revenue that stems from federal and state legislative changes and, of course, declining enrollment.

As we prepare our budget for next year, we will continue the effort to right-size the organization. We have too many schools, too many people and too many programs for a district our size. It will be difficult — even painful — but, before we go back to voters, we will do everything we can to cut our costs through building closures and reducing programs as well as administrative, teaching and support staffs.

I will be asking our union leadership to consider a one-year contract roll-over for next year. At the same time, I will also request that we jointly work on modifying our health care package. I have the utmost respect for our union leadership, and I promise that you will always hear the truth from me and that I will approach our issues in a collaborative manner. I am very confident that all of our efforts will leave us leaner, stronger, more efficient and more effective.

5. Providing safe, orderly and affirming community learning centers

I have already outlined the challenges we face to keep our students and staff safe and to maintain a well-disciplined learning environment. Over the past several months, I have met with our police resource officers and have spoken to parents and teachers about their concerns regarding disruptive students.

The district has tried many methods to help students who struggle with their behavior in school. Many of our high schools host separate alternative classes on site, and we have multiple therapeutic programs for special-needs students.

About two years ago, we established a centralized alternative program for middle schools students, the Akron Opportunity Center, which has quickly evolved into a positive environment for students to learn new appropriate behaviors and experience success. Next school year, we will explore some new ideas and try to expand some of the successful programs designed for students with discipline issues.

I am exploring the possibility of consolidating the hodgepodge of alternative programs at one site. I am looking at adding an elementary and high school alternative program for children with severe behavioral issues. This will allow us to reduce the day-to-day disruptions for most students, yet give focused attention to children with behavioral issues.

You can see that our plate is full. I know the challenges we face and the changes that will be required to meet these challenges head on.

And before I close, I want to say how proud I am to be associated with my colleagues who are working extremely hard in these difficult times. Will sacrifice be required? Absolutely! Will there be change? Absolutely! However, by respecting and acknowledging our past, we can have a brighter future.

I am very excited about the future of Akron Public Schools. Every organization and every individual present here today wants our children to succeed so they can reach adulthood to live and work in this community. Together, we can turn the traditional educational process into a collaborative initiative. Our success hinges on your help, and I invite you to share your ideas with me.

I commit to you that the children of Akron Public Schools come first. And I will do my very best to serve them and our community with care and understanding. Together, we can make a difference.

Thank you.